

How Russia could use your aunt's genealogy hobby to kill you

Joel Gehrke - Jul 22

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Your aunt's genealogy hobby could help [China](#) or [Russia](#) [design](#) a [biological weapon](#) to kill your family.

That risk alarms policymakers and officials in the United States, even if it's a remote prospect for most people. The emergence of such technology could allow rogue regimes to develop exquisite [assassination programs](#) with more than the usual impunity.

"There are now weapons under development, and developed, that are designed to target specific people," Rep. Jason Crow (D-CO), a member of the committees that oversee the Pentagon and the U.S. intelligence community, said Friday at the Aspen Security Forum in Aspen, Colorado. "That's what this is, where you can actually take someone's DNA, you know, their medical profile, and you can target a biological weapon that will kill that person or take them off the battlefield or make them inoperable."

The most sophisticated U.S. rivals could use such methods to open a new front against the American population, another senior lawmaker added, through the targeting of [food supplies](#) on a vast scale.

If we look at food security and what can our adversaries do with biological weapons that are directed at our animal agriculture, at our agricultural sector ... highly pathogenic avian influenza, African swine fever," said Sen. [Joni Ernst](#) (R-IA), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "All of these things have circulated around the globe, but if targeted by an adversary, we know that it brings about food insecurity. Food insecurity drives a lot of other insecurities around the globe."

The lawmakers outlined those risks to elaborate on a warning aired more obliquely by Army Gen. Richard Clarke, the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command.

"Russia is willing to use those against political opponents. They're willing to use them on their own soil, but then to go in on the soil of a NATO ally in the UK and use those ... and as we go into the future, we have to be prepared for that eventualities. And I don't think we talk about it as much as we should and look for methods to continue to combat."

That was a reference to Russia's use of a [nerve agent](#) in the attempted assassination of former double agent Sergei Skripal, who was found unconscious along with his niece on a bench in southeast England. British officials said that they were poisoned with an "extremely sophisticated" chemical weapon. The Skripals survived the attack, but a British woman named Dawn Sturgess [died](#) after unwitting exposure to the poison, which had been disguised in a discarded perfume bottle.

Anxiety about the American vulnerability to advanced chemical or biological weapons has festered within the U.S. intelligence community in recent years, while other domestic policy agencies have evinced less awareness of the potential threat. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) has faulted the Department of Health and Human Services since 2019 for jeopardizing "the genomic data of American citizens" by partnering with a laboratory test company linked to the Chinese Communist regime. An HHS watchdog confirmed last year that the public health bureaucracy had not taken such exotic national security risks into account when establishing and operating their programs.

For Crow, the more salient risk comes from the cavalier attitude with which private citizens share their personal information — including their DNA.

"People will very rapidly spit into a cup and send it to 23andMe and get really interesting data about their background — and guess what? Their DNA is now owned by a private company," he said. "So we have to have an open and public discussion ... about what does the protection of healthcare information, DNA information, and your data look like? Because that data is actually going to be procured and collected by our adversaries for the development of these systems."